Curatorial Liberties: Cinema and Augmented Reality in *Betwixt and Between: An Untold Tom Thomson Story*

Peter M. Flannery

Abstract

This article examines the role of cinematic concepts in traditional gallery spaces through the use of narrative, moving image, augmented reality, time, and immersive space in the Tom Thomson Art Gallery’s *Betwixt and Between*. *Betwixt and Between* makes a definitive step forward in the production of cinematically-based and deeply emotive exhibitions, immediately drawing the viewer into the exhibition and sustaining their interest through a slowly unfolding story and self-directed experience. This exhibition is a clear marker in the movement towards cinematic and engaging projects exhibited within a white-cube space as it demonstrates the potential of future exhibitions to connect with viewers through emerging technologies such as augmented reality and the critical intersections between contemporary issues of culture and curatorship.

The Tom Thomson Art Gallery’s summer 2017 exhibition, *Betwixt and Between: An Untold Tom Thomson Story* opens with a short introductory video in which a young woman stands before the gallery in Owen Sound, Ontario, reporting for *Channel Six News*. She tells the story of the discovery of a hand-drawn map leading to a young man’s journal, hidden deep in Algonquin Park at a place marked T.T. Recorded video clips follow artists Joel Richardson and Germinio Pio Politi on their expedition to find the journal and uncover an untold and previously unknown story of the relationship between a young man from Cape Croker reserve and one of Canada’s...
most well-known artists. The video also features archival photographs and maps, as well as an interview with Virginia Eichhorn, the director of the Tom Thomson gallery, as she examines the journal in the gallery’s storage vault. While the narrative unfolds, the audience begins to feel the excitement of this story which could change the course of Canada’s art historical canon by expanding upon our knowledge of one of Canada’s most respected, yet most mysterious artists and by incorporating Indigenous groups within a canon that has largely left them in the margins.

What if, however, this newly uncovered narrative documenting the relationship between George Nadjiwon and Tom Thomson was not entirely true? What if the Tom Thomson, an art gallery, a place of knowledge and education, had expanded documented history beyond the facts to produce a narrative exploring what might have been, under different circumstances? In developing *Betwixt and Between*, that is exactly what lead artists Joel Richardson, Germinio Pio Politi, and Nyle Johnston did along with Eichhorn, producing an exhibition which the Tom Thomson Art Gallery states is “85% Authentic” (Eichhorn 2018). As mostly factual, *Betwixt and Between* develops an interesting opportunity to alter the traditional concept of the art gallery and allow viewers to engage more acutely with the narrative as they consider not only its immediate impacts but delve deeper and consider what might be true and false about the facts presented. In this way, the viewer is drawn to examine the narrative more closely and rethink their ideas of what might be fact and fiction, or right and wrong, within the exhibition and more widely within the canon of art history and white cube gallery spaces.

Through a fictionalized narrative based loosely on the politics and events of Tom Thomson’s life and local indigenous communities at the end of the nineteenth century, *Betwixt and Between* imagines what might have been in order to develop an educational and thought-provoking...
experience for the viewer. The narrative and an engaging augmented reality mobile application allow *Betwixt and Between* to unfold cinematically as the viewer makes their way through the space filled with both real and fabricated “artifacts” that build the relationship between Thomson and Nadjiwon as viewers’ understandings of time, space, objects, and the events surrounding them are blurred.

Through a series of text panels and additional information contained within the mobile application, the fictionalized narrative of the exhibition slowly unfolds as the viewer explores a truly immersive space. Surrounded by large-scale murals covering all four walls as well as the floor to strengthen the archival, map, and “fact”-based nature of the exhibition, the viewer uses the relevant materials in a dynamic experience of learning and understanding previously unknown and unimagined stories. *Betwixt and Between* enables the viewer to consider the life of one of Canada’s most well-known, yet mysterious artists in relation to a community that has largely been ignored in Canadian art historical discourse for decades. Just as cinema shifts our perceptions of time and space, the exhibition alters our understanding of past and present as viewers take part in an engaging unfolding of its narrative. Through affect and immersive space, the narrative connects deeply and personally with viewers in a way that brings the previously unknown and unconsidered to the surface. It develops a new understanding within the viewer, one in which colonial and indigenous narratives become intertwined and past, present, and future considerations of these issues begin to blur.

While other recent Canadian exhibitions have included augmented reality elements, most notably *ReBlink*, which brought permanent collection works to life at the Art Gallery of Ontario from July 6, 2017-April 8, 2018, and *Anthropocene*, a special exhibition launched collaboratively...
at the Art Gallery of Ontario and the National Gallery of Canada from September 28, 2018-January 6, 2019, these endeavors have been less integrated within a cinematic or narrative experience of aesthetics. While the engaging and immersive nature of augmented reality allows for the examination of objects, places, and times that are foreign and unknown to viewers, intervening on perceptions of time and space in a cinematic restructuring and reinterpretation of our environment, approaches to the use of the technology have been varied and produced mixed results.

*Anthropocene*’s augmented reality experience, developed by AVARA, is among the most advanced and immersive. The mobile application allows the viewer to explore three artificial installations that depict the burning of ivory tusks in Nairobi National Park, Sudan, the last male northern white rhinoceros who died in March 2018, and “Big Lonely Doug,” the second largest Douglas Fir in Canada which grows in the middle of a clear-cut forest. Also playing short documentary clips when activated by still photographs within the exhibitions, the AVARA application brings a new level of experience for the viewer, however its usefulness and emotive quality is limited to the specific “trigger” works that activate the augmented reality experiences at specific points through the exhibitions.

Since the 1990s, augmented reality technology has been incorporated into more and more fields, including art galleries and museums in more recent years, with the potential to increase participation in a realistic and novel educational experience that combines real and virtual spaces and ideas (Chang et al. 2014, 186). When applied within gallery spaces, this new technology can extend a visitor’s experience beyond the physical object itself to include alternate narratives and images including further contextual information, and photographs of various related people, places, and works (tom Dieck, Jung, and tom Dieck 2018, 2014-2015). When employed correct-
ly, augmented reality elements hold the potential to improve visitors’ experiences and encourage an appreciation of the work on display beyond that experienced when augmented reality is not used (Chang et al. 2014, 186). When examining exhibitions such as *Anthropocene* and *Betwixt and Between*, it becomes clear that a variety of approaches to augmented reality are in use in museum and gallery contexts and not all provide equal engagement or effectiveness.

In comparison to *Anthropocene*, the augmented reality element of *Betwixt and Between* flows through the entirety of the exhibition as well as site-specific scavenger hunts throughout southwestern Ontario, a digital geo-caching project of sorts, that builds and extends the narrative, creating intense and sustained audience engagement. Providing short chapters of the full narrative, and interactive quizzes through “trigger” spots throughout the exhibition while activating the space with augmented reality images like that of Thomson and Nadjiwon paddling a canoe that sits within the space, the application merges cinematic narrative with mobile gaming to engage the viewer. Rather than passively viewing a collection of works, *Betwixt and Between* encourages the viewer to become actively involved with the exhibition and to feel an intense level of connectedness through the narrative, moving images, and augmented reality of the experience. As recent studies into the use of augmented reality in art galleries, museums, and tourism sites have shown, there is immense potential to increase connection, education, and enjoyment for visitors (tom Dieck, Jung, and tom Dieck 2018, 2031). Through this added layer of the connectedness and additional opportunities for education through narrative and an immersive experience, visitors are able to gain more knowledge and direct connection with the individual works as well as the exhibition as a whole. The additional information provided through the mobile application as well as the participatory nature of the immersive exhibition experience allow for quality en-
engagement for visitors with the *Betwixt and Between* exhibition and can support a more lasting impact through direct involvement that will extend the exhibition’s narratives and influence.

In “Curatorial Acts,” Mieke Bal (2012) argues that the audience remain central to the role of the curator and that the act of presenting the selected works to the public contributes to the social and political experience just as much as the content of each of the individual works (191). Combining revolutionary elements with physical objects and real artifacts such as original treaty documents, the artists and curator reframe these typical, historical items with a new perspective and audience involvement that radically changes every aspect of the experience. Rather than viewing these historical objects as disconnected fragments of the past, *Betwixt and Between* incorporates them within Canada’s art historical canon and within a narrative that the viewer is actively engaged in through personal and technological connections. The objects become markers of a history that has been marginalised and forgotten as they are incorporated into our knowledge of Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven and the viewer themselves become active participants in the development of these connections and the narrative.

The emotional connection that develops through this process is particularly unique and enables new perspectives and meanings to form surrounding this exhibition and the intersection between Tom Thomson, a symbol of colonialist power who helped to create our concept of “Canada,” and the indigenous communities that have been here for many years before us. Bal’s “Losing it: Politics of the Other (Medium)” presents a critical analysis of video and media arts that engages concepts of otherness of particular importance to the issues of indigenous arts and representation at play in *Betwixt and Between*. For Bal (2011), the uniqueness of video and media arts as the “other” medium provides a new realm of possibilities for engaging with viewers,
producing a “resonance” in which the viewer is not only witnessing the works, but given the op-
portunity to “‘speak back to’ or ‘answer’” them (393). The cinematic and narrative qualities of 
the video works which Bal (2011) discusses allow for political and deeply moving experiences in 
the qualities of otherness presented through the medium and subject matter (378).

In *Betwixt and Between*, the merging of colonialist and indigenous narratives and per-
spectives participate in this “otherness” and resonates with the viewer through the emotive and 
experiential qualities of the exhibition. Through the exhibition’s narrative and the engagement of 
the augmented reality application, the viewer forms a personal connection with the figures and 
events of the exhibition, particularly Nadjiwon and the treatment of indigenous communities in 
this period. Rather than merely observing artifacts, viewers experience a more direct encounter 
with the objects, events, and images that allow them to become participants in the narrative of 
Thomson and Nadjiwon and consider the implications of the exhibition for all Canadians and 
indigenous groups both historically and in the future.

Within a gallery known largely for the work of Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven, 
often deemed the creators of a visual Canadian national identity, *Betwixt and Between* introduces 
indigenous communities to an old narrative but complicates the viewer’s perception by providing 
a means for experiential learning. By revealing the marginalised and forgotten members of our 
collective history in a way that engages viewers in an immersive and experiential space and ap-
lication, the exhibition enables viewers to participate in the development of the narratives and 
meaning generation as their experiences alter their visions of the future for indigenous peoples 
and the canon of Canadian art history.
Betwixt and Between is an exhibition which not only employs cinema within its space, but also applies cinematic concepts to produce an exhibition that critically engages with important cultural issues and provokes a unique emotional response. Merging contemporary issues with fictionalized narrative in moving image, historical artifacts, immersive exhibition design, and augmented reality technology, this exhibition provides viewers with the opportunity to witness and actively participate in the slow unfolding of unexpected and unimagined ideas. This exhibition develops a cinematic aesthetic in which the viewer plays an active role in the generation of the narrative and meaning of the space and imagine new futures for marginalised groups within our art and society. Through affective and contemplative narratives and images, Betwixt and Between demonstrates a pivotal step forward for contemporary curatorship in traditional gallery spaces that can, with continued development, employ cinematic concepts of narrative, time, moving-image, and immersive spaces to engage artworks and audiences in examinations of critical issues in an altered experience of reality.

Bibliography:


---

**About the Author**

Peter M. Flannery is an emerging curator, writer and art historian. He is currently pursuing his Master of Arts in Art History and Visual Culture at the University of Guelph. Peter is energetic and passionate about contemporary visual culture, LGBTQ2S+ issues, and arts administration. He has previously worked at the Woodstock Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Guelph, Renann Isaacs Contemporary Art, and the School of Fine Art and Music at the University of Guelph and is the 2018 recipient of the SLSA Edward Bruns Graduate Essay Prize. Peter is currently based in Guelph, Ontario.